

Governor Hochul,

Thank you for your recent comments acknowledging the difficult working conditions that the men and women of NYSCOPBA have been enduring. Many of my coworkers are suffering from exhaustion and burnout (mental and physical) from being overworked in dangerous conditions and we need your help. We have reached our breaking point as a result of the increases in violence and the chronic staffing crisis that requires us to give up our days off and be required to work excessive amounts of mandatory overtime every pay period. Many of us are now being mandated to work 3 consecutive shifts (24 hours) with no consideration to our health, safety or our families. When we report for our regularly scheduled shifts we have no idea when we will be allowed to leave the facility. This lack of a work/life balance has taken its toll on thousands of families across the state. Something needs to change and we need your help to change it.

The staffing crisis in New York State corrections and in mental health services is real, it is dangerous and it is not sustainable. The ongoing recruiting efforts are not producing the number of new employees needed to keep up with the amount people leaving state service and the State's ability to retain our most seasoned and experienced employees has proven to be very difficult. Many of our colleagues are making the choice to leave state service prior to becoming retirement eligible, or they are retiring as soon as they attain 25 years of state service. The staff that remain are left to bear the brunt of the dismal working conditions and are forced to fill the holes necessary to staff each shift. It should come to no one's surprise that the State Comptroller's annual report on state agency overtime spending routinely cites DOCCS, OMH and OPWDD as the State agencies creating over 60% of ALL state overtime spending.

Prison closures will not improve the current staffing crisis, as many claim that it will. With each facility that closes the agency's potential to attract prospective employees is restricted by the locations of the facilities that remain. Less people are likely to apply for jobs at our facilities if there are no facilities close to where they live. Many of my colleagues who are currently deciding what is best for their families will leave state service rather than transfer to a facility hours away. When will the State reinvest the millions of dollars saved by closing over 25 prisons, back into their employees to give them the necessary relief and compensation that they deserve?

As frontline employees we are not consulted about, nor do we make the rules, policies, or laws that impact our work providing security services for the people of this State. However, recent changes in the laws, specifically the HALT law, has resulted in the highest levels of violence ever recorded, all while the incarcerated population is at one of the lowest levels in decades. This law has been implemented to the detriment of all of those who work and live in correctional facilities. Currently in 2024, we are on pace to eclipse well over 2,000 recorded I/I-on-I/I assaults AND over 2,000 I/I on staff assaults. The current numbers are unprecedented. Since the implementation of HALT, the number of assaults have doubled in our facilities. Revisions to the HALT law must be considered for the safety of all of those who work and live in correctional facilities.

I've highlighted a few of the many ongoing problems that we are facing. I also want to suggest some improvements to be considered that could assist the State in addressing these issues. Given the lack of civilian and security staff to properly run our facilities and programming modules, DOCCS should reduce inmate movement and programming until the proper civilian and security staffing levels are reached to allow staff to perform their duties in a work environment that doesn't subject them to mandatory overtime and historic levels of violence. Additionally, DOCCS must stop mandating employees to work on their regularly scheduled days off so that we can regain a semblance of a work/life balance.

To assist with the retaining employees, I encourage you to sign NYSCOPBA's "Death Gamble" legislation (A9084 / S8404) currently awaiting delivery to your desk. This legislation would assist in retaining experienced staff who are retirement eligible while ensuring that their families are protected in the event of an untimely death. Currently, there are very few incentives keeping staff from retiring when they are eligible. You have vetoed this bill before citing fiscal concerns. However, the overtime cost that DOCCS and OMH incur, far exceeds the cost of this bill. Please reconsider your position on this legislation and sign it into law.

To assist with recruitment, the State should expedite the salary upgrade application for Correction Officer and Correction Sergeants titles. NYSCOPBA has repeatedly applied for Civil Service upgrades for numerous titles only to be rejected each time. DOCCS' current recruitment strategy is not producing the number of recruits necessary to replace the number of retirements. Providing a salary upgrade and a higher starting salary will go a long way towards recruiting and retaining employees in the future.

With your help, I am hopeful that we can accomplish what everybody has been talking about for many years; which is creating safer correctional facilities for all who work and live in New York's prisons. I hope that I was able to bring awareness and encourage action to address our serious concerns. Together, we can find some common-ground and develop some real common-sense solutions to provide us with much needed relief. Something needs to change because what has been done in the past has not been working for a long time.

Respectfully submitted,